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Writing Sample

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Includes "Losing gems as you translate" and "A Traveler's Tales."

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Losing gems as you translate Some experiences of a Burmese translator

Except for the negative prefix which always goes with the verb we have virtually no prefixes. We usually replace a verb complex to get the English sense. For “un-American” we either say “American-not-like” or “American-go-against.” For “pre-war” we must say “war-not-happen-time” or “war-welcome-time,” and for “postwar” we have “war-finish-time” or “war after.”

The notion of singular/plural, past/present, active/passive contrasts is unknown to Burmese, as it is to some of our neighbors. Someone has said Mao Zedong's politico-economical thinking may have been quite different had he read foreign writings in the original. Unfortunately he read translations, which among other things had Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* as *Wealth of Nation* in Chinese. When our ex-prime minister U Nu translated Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, he called it in Burmese *The Commentary on the Strength of (a) Friend*.

When the Unesco asked the world's governments to celebrate the International Book Year, the Burmese authorities had a translation competition to have the best translation of the Year's motto: Books for all. The prize-winning translation was "The book is man's friend." The majority of our people are Buddhists, who take refuge in the Three Gems, the Buddha, the Dhamma or his teaching, and the Sangha or the Community of monks. But the Burmese word for the third is *monk* and the collective idea is lost.

There are no relative pronouns in Burmese. Pali texts with relative clauses are usually broken up into simple sentences.

He who sees my teaching sees me. (original Pali)

Someone sees my teaching. That one sees me. (Burmese translation)

The nearest Burmese word to the relative pronoun is the participle and the modern Burmese translator often takes advantage of this to translate the English relative clauses:

People who live in glass houses should not throw stones. (English)

People living in glass houses should not throw stones. (Burmese translation)

The trick works for short sentences but as the sentences get longer, the translator has only to break up the sentences. And Burmese normally uses clauses where English uses nouns. The latest *Time* on my table [August 23, 2004] has the sentence

Conservationists are taking new steps to save the world's shrinking population of big cats. [p. 3]

The Burmese translation will be something like this:

Tigers and lions in the world are becoming fewer and fewer. People working to protect the environment are trying to save these tigers and lions.

The order of words in Burmese is Subject x Complete/Object x Verb, and this poses a problem too. Later on in the same article the *Time* author says

It was India that pioneered the use of sanctuaries to save big cats.

We can only say in Burmese as

The country pioneering to build safe places for tigers was India.

Finally, there are two trends of translation in Burma: one school that began with religious translations from Pali tends to explain, so makes additions to the text, and the other just tries to retell the substance of the original. In the hands of the former school Robert Frost's

Whose woods these are I think I know

His house is in the village though

becomes

What beautiful woods these are! Who is the fortunate owner of these lovely trees? I think and I know now. That's the man living in the village. He has a nice house.

The latter school will just render the two lines into
The owner of the woods lives in the village.
And that is all.

Abstract

Languages differ not only in lexical words and their meanings but in the way the speakers think. A Burmese does not think the way an American or any other English-speaking person thinks. So certain ideas that are quite normal to an English speaker don't come to the Burmese mind. If you ask a Burmese a question he will show his disagreement by uttering a negative verb or statement, not a single word NO. He has 'Yes', but no 'NO'. The Burmese negate only verbs and not nouns. There are no Burmese equivalents for 'no money,' 'no food' 'no man' or 'nowhere'. Likewise our negative prefix can be used with verbs only and we have difficulty translating words like 'un-American' or 'non-violence.' Then, we can't say 'I have a book' in Burmese, for we have only the verb to BE but lack to HAVE. Other basic words the Burmese have no equivalents for are: *parent, brother, sister, cousin, arm, leg, lap*. Burmese also has no singular/plural, present/past, active/passive contrasts. To translate these things the translator has to say in a round-about way. To say *parents* one uses *mother and father*. To indicate plurality one uses *many*, to refer to the past time one uses a word or phrase showing past, like *yesterday* or *last year*; to express the passive idea one uses *receive the action*. When two or more sentences are joined by a relative pronoun, the Burmese translator normally breaks up the sentence. Finally, there is the difference in word order, which in Burmese is: Subject + Object/ Complement + Verb. There are two main methods of translation in Burma: one school likes to explain things and tends to produce enlargements of the original text, and the other just tries to give the substance of the whole thing.

A Traveler's Tales [a fable]

When I get back home, I will not be able to have a public lecture like this in the university or elsewhere (the law stipulates that no more than five persons can gather in a public place), but friends may come to me, and they certainly will, or I may go out with them to a café or teashop for a chat over a pot of green tea. Then, after looking around this way and that for potential listening ears I will have the courage enough to recount some of my experiences. I might begin:

‘Well, I came back just two days ago.’

One of the friends might say: ‘I’m glad you are back. How’s the trip?’

‘Not bad’ will probably be my reply, for I’m used to such ready-made answers. Then my first friend or my second friend is certain to raise another question, ‘What sort of place have you been to?’

Then, as you might have correctly conjectured, I would answer: ‘I have been to a very peaceful place.’

Then the above two friends or the third friend – but there can’t be a fourth, remember the law – or the three of them in unison will shout as loud as the four of us can hear clearly but not so loud for fear a fifth one may overhear: ‘How come! In a world where two or three car bombs are causing thirty-four or forty-six innocent deaths every day, and Sunni soldiers are besieging Shiite cemeteries, or Shiite militants rocketing Sunni mosques, Israeli soldiers killing Palestinian old men and women, or Palestinian suicide bombers shattering Israeli school buses, can there be a peaceful place left on earth?’

‘There *is*, my friends, and I’ve been to it’ – I will be consistent with my answers.

Born and brought up in a war-torn, strife-filled, poverty-stricken country, my friends will certainly have difficulty believing my words. One of them, or two of them for that matter, will direct a long gaze in my direction and slowly mutter in an unbelieving tone: ‘Are the people really living in total concord? Aren’t they fighting each other?’

Sad to say, I will have to answer with all my honesty: ‘They aren’t living in concord. They have their differences and disagreements and they are fighting each other. I have seen them fighting each other on TV and read about these fights in newspapers.’

‘There you are! It must be so. It’s human nature. I know they must be fighting,’ my friends must be very happy to hear my confession. So I will continue:

‘They fight, my friends, one faction against the other, but not with guns and car bombs but with their tongues and lips. They engage in wars of words.’

I could see in my mind their amazed faces. Poor guys! They have never seen people fighting with words. After some minutes of unbelief, one or the other of the friends might put forward a different question:

‘Where did you stay in that peaceful place of yours?’

My answer of course will be: ‘At the university.’

‘University, of all places! How far away from town is the university?’ People always think what is true in one place is true in another.

I will answer, 'I have no idea where the university starts and the town ends or where the town starts and the university ends!'

Again three amazed faces. Then one or the other of the friends would come out with an exclamation: 'You are a quiet man and you had to stay at a university! How noisy and and rowdy the students would be! Boys and girls drinking beer, and kissing in the parks and on the sidewalks, and shouting at the top of their voices!'

I won't be able to stop a smile as I answer: 'They have no beer to drink in the university cafeterias and restaurants. And they all look well-behaving boys and girls. They will naturally have boy friends and girl friends. But I haven't seen any two kissing in public. They are very studious too. In the lecture room they are attentive and outside, if not walking, they are on the benches or lying on the grass, their faces glued to books.'

One would feel curious enough to ask: 'When a girl is passing by, don't the boys make any boos and cat calls?'

I have nothing else to say but reply in the negative.

A few moments of bewilderment later, something must have entered the mind of one friend, so he might say:

'The sidewalks will be overwhelmed by venders and hawkers so you'll have little space for walking?'

Again, to my friends' astonishment I must give a definite no.

'When you stop your car at the traffic lights, aren't you mobbed by beggars?'

Poor guys, they will be more surprised than ever before when I tell them, 'My dear friends, there are no beggars there in that peaceful place.'

One of the friends is a businessman and his work often involves going to the different government offices. He might ask: 'Did you have any occasion to go to the government offices there?'

'Of course, I did. I had to go to the Social Security, the Post Office, and some others.'

'How much money did you give to the guard at the door, the office boys, the clerks, the officers of various ranks?'

'Not a penny' I would answer and I can imagine how shocked they would be to hear that piece of news.

But one of them is a guy who will not easily swallow what other people say, and he would argue: 'Without "outside money" how could government employees survive?'

'Bribery or corruption thrives only when the employees are not paid well.' I know this is beyond my friends' understanding but I know no other way of explaining the situation.

I can see my unbelieving friends whispering among themselves but I will only try to smile. Then I may hear someone raise yet another question:

'I know you flew to that place but once there you would have to travel by car. Are the roads very rutty and bumpy?'

'At some places I saw workers mending parts of the highway but in most places, even in the villages I've been to, the roads and streets are all very good.'

'But the contractors and the engineers engaged in the road work along the highway will conspire to steal the tar and the cement, won't they?'

'As I have told you just now, corruption or bribery thrives only when the workers are not paid well. There workers, engineers, officers, they all have good pays and they need not resort to dirty ways or foul means.' I am sure these are very strange stories for my dear friends.

'Do the people there read only the advertisements in the newspapers?'

'They also read the news.'

‘Don’t they get bored reading all the rubbish about No 1 Guy sending a birthday card to the daughter of the President of Ruritania on the occasion of her 13th birthday, and No 2 Guy opening a Trade Fair of the Oriental Tiger, and No 3’s obese wife inspecting the branch office of the government-sponsored Women’s Organization and all that?’

‘The newspapers there are independent papers and they can write what they like and can call the No 1 guy a louse or an idiot, and they often do.

This will be a bit too much for my friends and they will shake their consternation-struck heads, convinced more than ever that what I have been telling them is after all just one of those travelers’ tales or tall tales.

My “tales” have not ended but at the very moment some thugs from the People’s Strength Organization would enter the café and I might have to call it a day.

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